

The Future of Communities: The Rise of Rural Communities and Small Cities

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Four major emerging forces that impact the future of communities are presented, with the objective of understanding and guiding research and public policy development. The focus is on Canada, but the findings are also expected to have validity for other countries and the world as a whole. The basic conclusion is that the widely-held view that ever-larger cities grow at the expense of rural communities and smaller cities, is not supported by the forces driving change now and in the longer term. Cities (with populations of 0.5 to 1 million), small urban areas (<0.5 million), and rural communities (<1,000) offer many advantages and can be expected to thrive, while medium cities (1 to 5 million), large cities (5 to 10 million), and mega-cities (>10 million) will be challenged.

Introduction

There are presently no universally accepted definitions of 'rural' and 'urban', which complicates the consideration and comparison of their respective communities. For instance, the United Nations uses Statistics Canada's definition of urban for Canada (i.e., places of 1,000 or more inhabitants, having a population density of 400 or more per square kilometre). It also uses the United Kingdom's definition of 'urban', i.e., settlements where the population is 10,000 or more¹.

The United Nations uses the following categories for cities, which are also adopted in this paper.

Megacities	>10 million
Large Cities	5 to 10 million
Medium size cities	1 to 5 million
Cities	0.5 to 1 million
Urban areas	<0.5 million (but excludes rural communities)

Four major emerging forces are identified which are believed to impact the evolution of urban and rural communities. The interaction of the forces is subsequently considered, pointing to important research and public policy needs.

¹ United Nations Demographic Yearbook 2011; <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dyb2011/notes/notes06.pdf>

Major Emerging Force #1: Demographics

The populations of the world and Canada are growing and, excepting major disasters, can be expected to continue to do so, as shown in Figures 1 and 2 below.

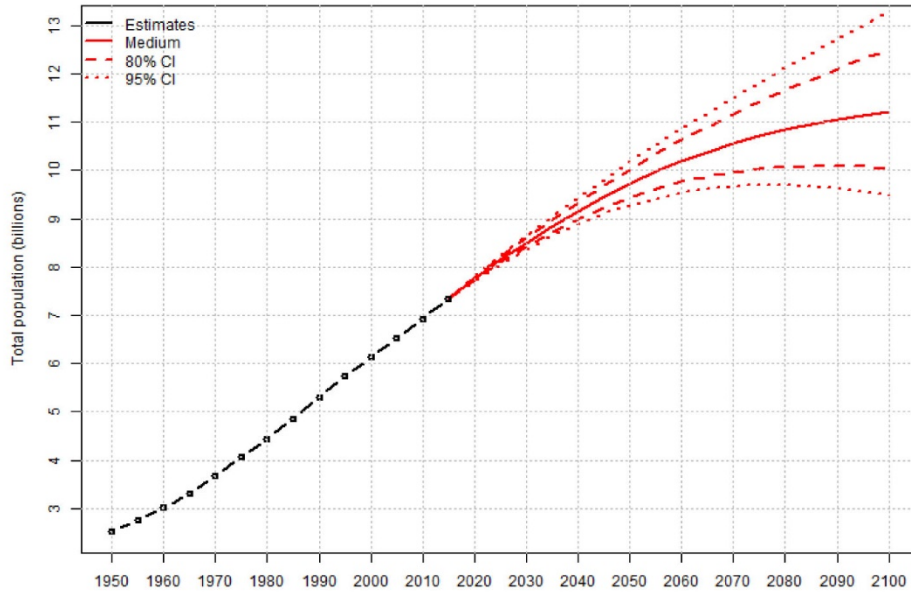


Figure 1: World population (billions) – actual and projected¹

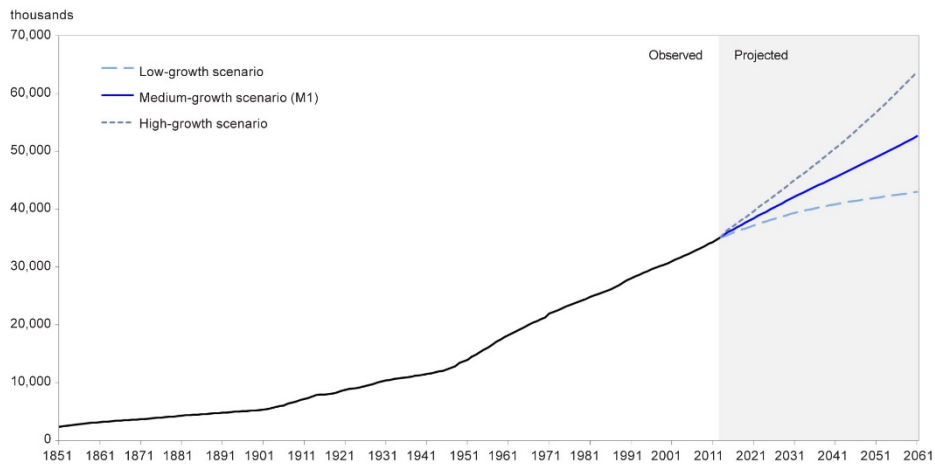


Figure 2: Canadian population (thousands) – actual and projected²

² Statistics Canada. 2010. *Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories 2009 to 2036*, catalogue no. 91-520-XPE, low-growth scenario, medium-growth scenario (M1) and high-growth scenario, censuses of population, 1851, 1861 and 1871, Demography Division, Population Estimates Program.

It is now well understood that most populations are aging rapidly. Canada's population aged 65 and over now exceeds the population below 15 (Fig. 3).

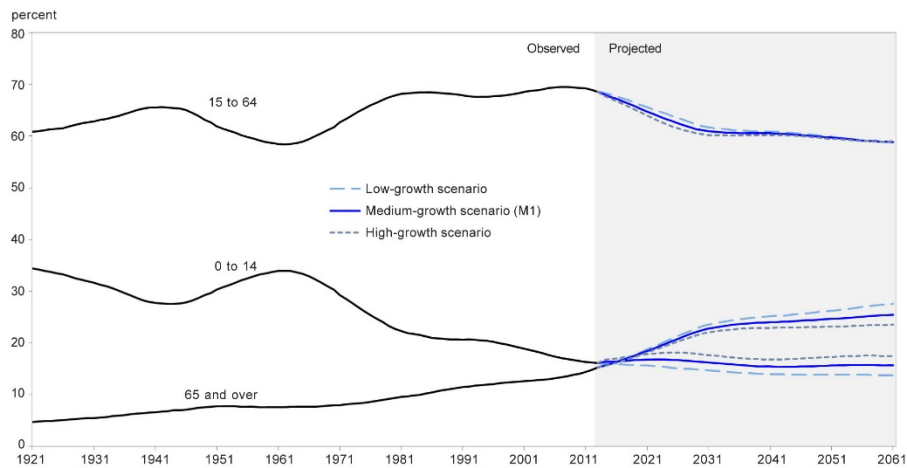


Figure 3: Canadian population (percentage) by age category – actual and projected³

Consequently, the ratio of citizens 15 to 64 relative to those 65 and older is continuing to decline (Fig. 4).

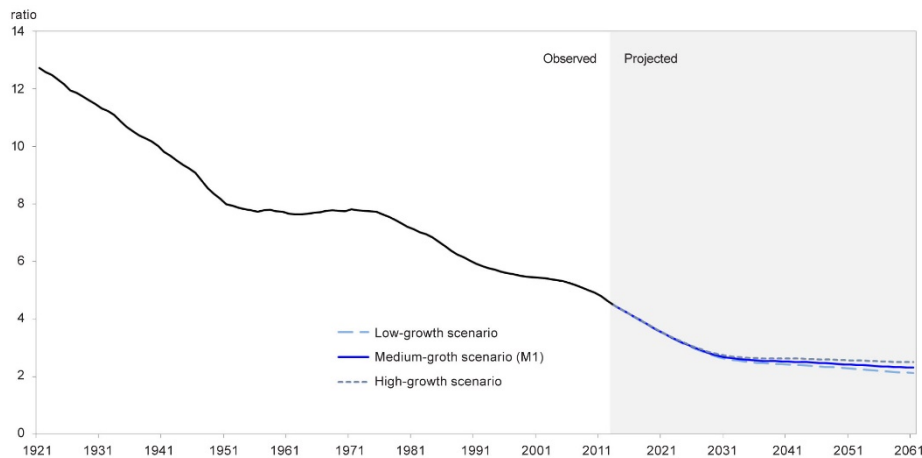
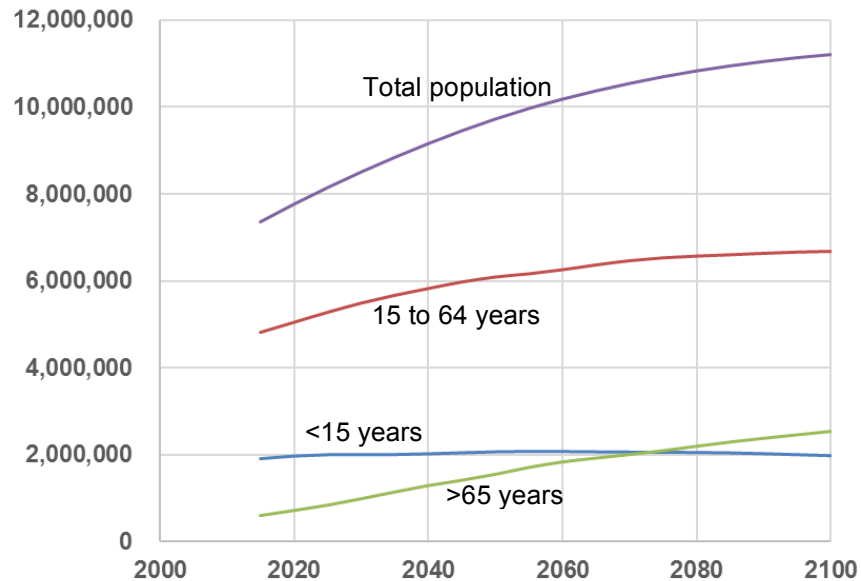


Figure 4: Ratio of number of persons aged 15 to 64 for each person aged 65 and over in Canada – actual and projected⁴

The trends in the global population are similar to Canada's, but the growth in the number of elderly occurs later (Fig. 5), largely due to presently younger populations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

³ ibid
⁴ ibid

Figure 5:
World
population
(thousands) by
age category –
actual and
projections⁵



The needs and interests of the elderly (i.e., those over 65) differ significantly from those of younger people. This includes sectors such as housing, transportation, communication, health care, entertainment, cultural amenities, and, very importantly, finances. Most elderly in Canada are not working or are only working part-time. In Canada, like other OECD countries, most elderly are fairly secure financially, having significant assets and incomes. However, affordability of housing and the rising cost of living are of increasing concern to them as well as the elderly poor.

Major Emerging Force #2: New Ways to Make a Living

Historically, the ability to make a living has shaped the way people lived; this will undoubtedly continue to be the case. In the distant past, it was essential to live close to sources of food and water. At that time and except for administrative and trading centres, the great majority of people lived in relatively small communities or even single family homes, close to their fields, hunting and fishing grounds. Communities were predominantly rural.

With the advent of the industrial revolution, people started to make a living by working in factories. Workers needed to be within easy walking distance or street car rides of factories and the populations and population densities of local communities grew sharply near factories. The availability of the personal automobile as well as better public transportation in North America and other industrialized countries extended the growth of communities into suburbs. The need for communications led to similar concentrations of populations engaged in the increasingly important intangible sectors, such as finance, banking, marketing, advertising, entertainment, education, health care, education.

⁵ United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision (July 2015)

Access to modern inexpensive and highly effective communications technologies, most notably the internet, will increasingly lessen the geographical link between where people work (i.e., where they make a living) and where they live. People no longer have to live and work in close proximity to their co-workers, customers, and clients. The need for communities with large and dense populations near places of work is consequently decreasing for many sectors of the economy.

Major Emerging Force #3: Creativity

The service and advanced manufacturing sectors have become the primary underpinnings of advanced and prosperous economies. These sectors are critically dependent on creativity, a finding that has become well recognized over the last two decades. Richard Florida, in his book on *The Rise of the Creative Class*⁶ concludes that “the kinds of communities that we both desire and that create economic prosperity are very different than those of the past. Social structures that were important in earlier years now work against prosperity”⁷. To attract members of the creative class, “communities must possess ‘the three ‘T’s’: Talent (a highly talented/educated/skilled population), Tolerance (a diverse community, which has a ‘live and let live’ ethos), and Technology (the technological infrastructure necessary to fuel an entrepreneurial culture). Members of the Creative Class value meritocracy, diversity and individuality, and look for these characteristics when they relocate”.

These characteristics have often been associated with larger cities, including megacities, implying that small cities and rural communities are unable to provide them. While this may have been valid in the past and still holds partly true today, modern means of communications have broken the isolation previously experienced by residents and workers in small and rural communities. Furthermore, such residents value the personal and the nearby natural environment, both of which can stimulate creativity. Another important advantage is the significantly lower cost of real estate and cost of living. These are particularly important for young families and the elderly. Larger cities are becoming unaffordable to many.

Major Emerging Force #4: Sustainability

The United Nations, in its 2030 Development Goals⁸, recognizes the importance of sustainability for cities and communities. Figure 6 shows the current and anticipated populations in cities of different sizes

⁶ Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class*, Routledge, New York and London (2004)

⁷ R. Florida, *City & Community*, 2(1), 3-19 (2003)

⁸ Transforming our world: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly Sep 25, 2015

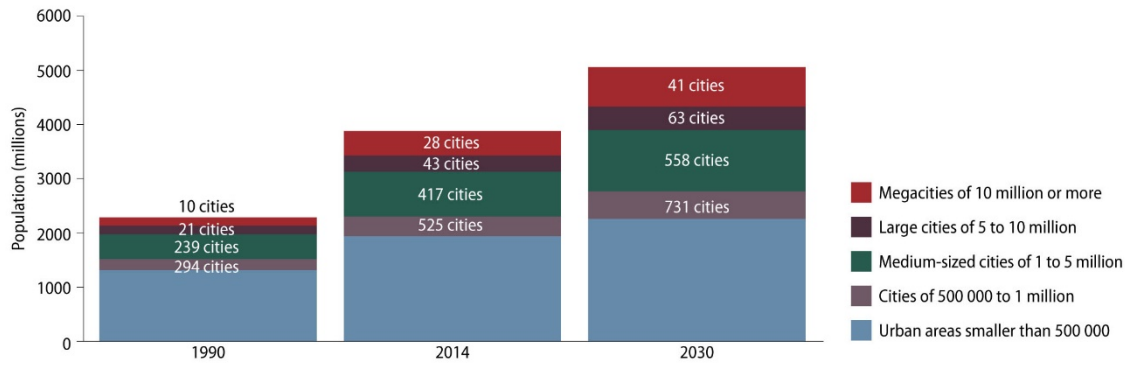


Figure 6: Actual and anticipated sizes of cities⁹

By 2030, major growth is anticipated in cities of all sizes, with approximately half the world's population living in cities of less than 500,000. The world's population of rural communities is projected to decline although this projection needs to be seen in light of countries using different definitions of 'urban' and 'rural'. As stated above, Canada defines 'rural' as communities with populations and population densities less than 1,000 persons and 400 persons per km², respectively. These are very small communities indeed.

As shown by Fig 7, Canada's rural population has stayed remarkably constant over the past 60 years, but a small decline is henceforth projected. The global situation is similar.

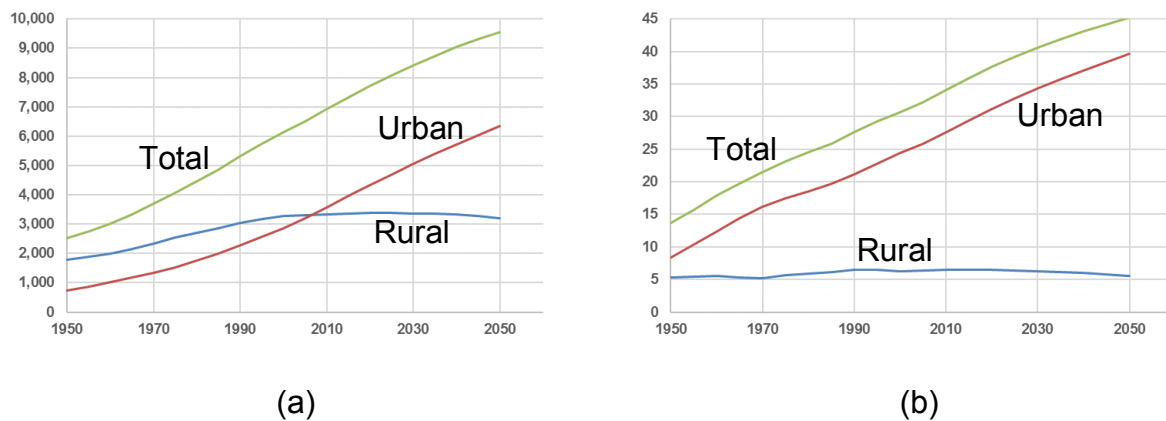


Figure 7: Population (millions) of the world (a) and Canada (b) – actual and projected for 1950 to 2050^{10,11}

⁹ World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2014)

¹⁰ World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, File 3: Urban Population, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2014)

¹¹ World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, File 4: Rural Population, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2014)

These projections are predicated on the assumption that current trends will continue and that large urban communities can be made sustainable or are more sustainable than small and rural communities.

It is not clear that this is indeed the case. For example, food and energy supplies are dependent on size of geographical area and it is uncertain whether the efficiencies afforded by large and highly concentrated populations overcome the disadvantage that food and energy have to be brought from farther away. What is certain is that the community costs of providing essential services, such as public transportation, policing, and social services are far greater in large cities.

Conclusions

While past trends have resulted in the growth of large and high-density urban areas, it is unclear that these trends will persist due to demographics, modern ways of making a living, creativity, and sustainability. These emerging forces seem to favour smaller cities and rural communities in future.

It is therefore critically important to re-examine the future of smaller cities and rural communities and arrive at a comparison with large communities that takes into account the major emerging forces of change.

It is acknowledged that not all countries have the fundamental choices available to Canada. For some states, like Singapore, the development of small cities and rural communities is clearly not an option, but most countries share Canada's geographical attributes, albeit to a lesser extent.

The research that is needed is therefore well suited to international collaboration and could create the foundations for new public policy that can be widely applied.